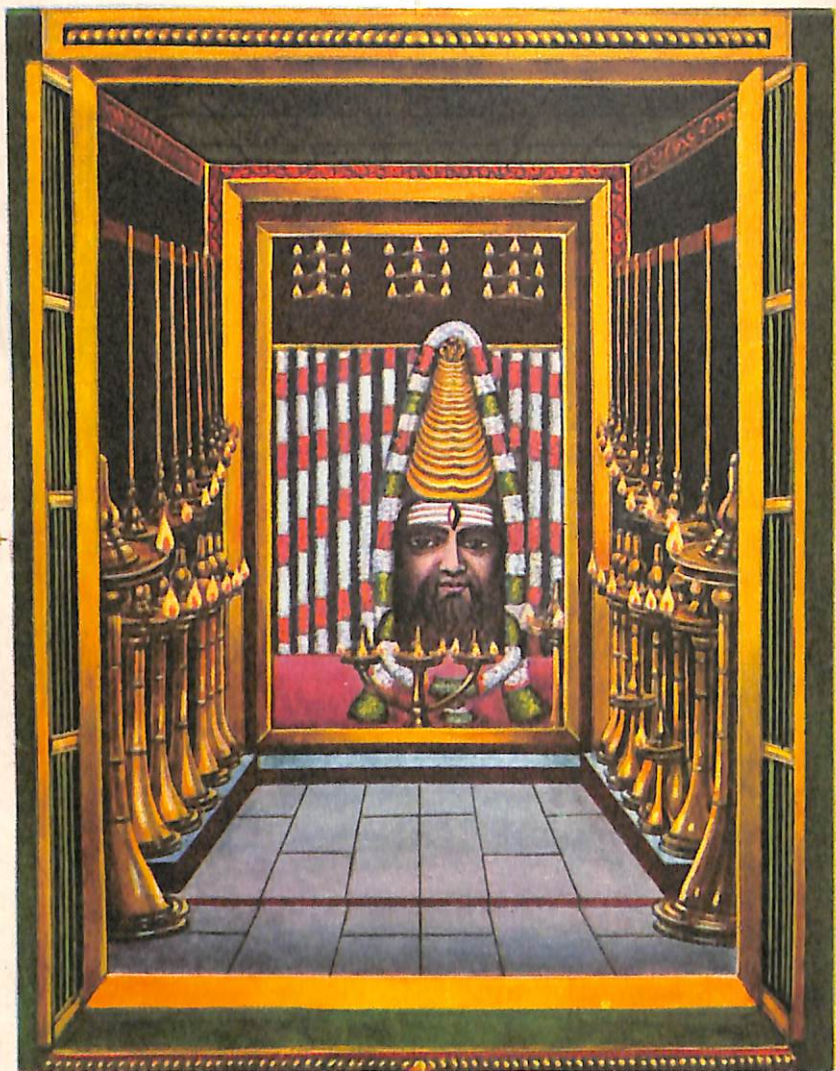


SUCHINDRUM



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Sri Sthanumalaya, Suchindrum.

SUCHINDRUM

826



By

V. MEENA

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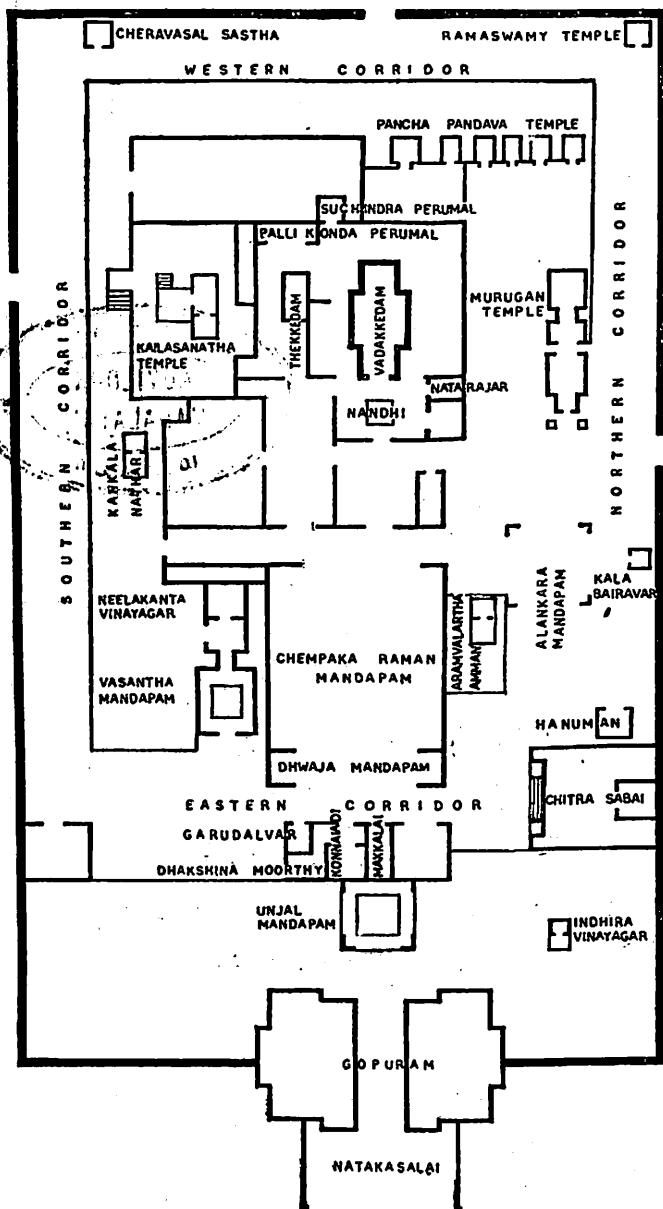
Publishers

044-020307

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Ground Plan of the Suchindrum Temple

SUCHINDRUM

The tourist on the way to Kanyakumari is always attracted by the charm and grandeur of the lofty Gopuram at Suchindrum, a small village just 7 kilometres from Nagercoil. Suchindrum is a place of exceptional interest in many respects. Its sculptural wealth is one of the best in the South. The village is surrounded on all sides by paddy fields and coconut groves. The broad streets around the Temple and the other smaller streets are well planned. There is a big tank with a beautiful Mandapam in the centre.

At the outskirts of the four main streets, there are more than ten small shrines dedicated to Durga, Vinayaka and other deities who guard the village. But the main attraction is the renowned shrine dedicated to Lord Sthanu-Mal-Ayan (Siva Vishnu Brahma), rich in puranic lores and traditions. The art, and architecture is of such arresting excellence that this ancient Temple stands as one of the foremost and richest among the South Indian Shrines.

The Suchindrum Temple

Even from a distance the Tower of the Temple, framed by the coconut trees and the sky as a backdrop, makes a

fascinating picture. The Gopuram is a marvel of construction, standing majestically 134 feet high. It is well proportioned and gradually tapers upwards. From the granite basement many panels present deities above the plinth area and the outer face is studded with plaster figures.

The main porch of the Temple is called Natakasala. The pillars on both the sides are imposing and massive in their structure. At the western end of the ceiling there appear three sculptured figures of Parvathi, Saraswathi and Lekshmi. The main entrance at the end of the pavilion is 24 ft. high and the doors are beautifully carved.

Crossing the main door, we pass on to a vast Unjal Mandapam, having exquisite carvings of Manmatha, Rathi, Arjuna and Karna on the four pillars at different corners. The beauty and grandeur of each figure is soul-stirring.

Then we enter the eastern corridor. Here the eloquent silence of the Devaguru, in the shrine of Dakshinamoorthy, compels our attention. From here we proceed to the Vasantha Mandapam which is a monument of art. Unlike other temples, the Navagrahas are placed at the top in the ceiling, surrounded by the twelve rasis. On the four pillars there are beautiful pieces of sculpture of the deities. At the

centre there is a single stone placed on a pedestal, around which water is stored in a reservoir. During summer, when the Vasantha Utsavam is celebrated, the idols of Suchindaperumal and Umadevi are placed here.

Nilakanta Vinayakar

Now we come to the shrine of a majestic Vinayaka of magnificent proportions. The deity is called Nilakanta Vinayakar or Mukkuruni Pillayar. After dharsan here, we enter the southern corridor, perhaps the largest in the South next to the one in Rameswaram. To the west of Nilakanta Vinayakar, is the shrine of Kankalanathar, Siva with a begging bowl in His hand.

Kailasathu Mahadevar

Then we climb up a few steps to enter a small shrine where Kailasathu Mahadevar is seen facing west, in the form of a linga. The monolithic roof is fascinating. There are age-worn inscriptions dating from 5th century A.D. (Tamil-Brahmi period) on the rocks around the shrine.

Further down, we find the Cheravasal Sastha. Moving further to the northern end of the western corridor, we come to the pretty little shrine where the charming figures of Rama and Sita are seen in a

sitting posture. At the entrance, we find the dutiful brother Lakshmana and near him stands the most devoted Hanuman, with folded hands.

Jayantheeswara Temples

We now proceed eastward and come to the northern entrance of the Temple by the side of which Kala Bhairava is enshrined. Turning west, we see the charming idol of Lord Muruga with Valli and Deivayanai on either side. At the entrance there are two statues of Kings or Chieftains called Nanjil Kuravas and two marvellous statues of Devadasis who donated their wealth to the temple.

Behind this shrine there are six small shrines dedicated to Mahadeva, Narayana, Rameswara, Krishna, Srichakra and Durga. These smaller shrines and the Muruga Shrine are together called Jayantheeswara Temples. It is interesting to note that Jayantheeswaram is another name for Tiruchendur, and the Muruga here is a close replica of the Lord there. It is also said that the Pandavas during their vana vasa visited Gnanaranya (Suchindrum) and worshipped the deities of Jayantheeswara Temples and hence they are also known as Pancha Pandava Temples. The image of Lord Krishna here is standing with a ball of butter in one hand and a peeled plantain

in the other, reminding one of the Lord at Guruvayur.

Alangara Mandapam

Then we enter the Alangara Mandapam where stand four pillars each carved out of a single stone. Two of them contain 33 smaller pillars and the other two 25 each. These are the famous Musical pillars and one can hear the most melodious musical tunes emanate from them when tapped.

South of the Musical pillars stand two monolithic statues of Venad Kings. These exquisite statues are so life-like that they eclipse even a perfect human figure. The excellent works of art here are of rare workmanship.

Dharmasamvarthani

Now we come to the shrine dedicated to Devi, the goddess Dharmasamvarthani. The image is made of bronze. The story is that a thirteen year old Vellala girl used to visit the shrine of Sthanumalaya with her mother, and it happened that one day when they were in the act of praying the daughter suddenly disappeared. A divine voice consoled the grief-stricken mother that the girl had become one with the Lord through her ardent devotion.

The girl's family installed the bronze image and from that day, in the month of Masi, the Thirukalyanam function is celebrated in the Temple.

Hanuman

Then we step out and are stunned to see the huge image of Hanuman the embodiment of devotion and humility, depicting his Viswarupa Dharsan given to Sita at the Asoka forest, as described in the Sundara Kanda of the Ramayana. The figure is 18 ft. high, remarkable for its grandeur and massiveness. As we approach the image we feel how insignificant we are and stand transfixed. Sri Anjaneya who is generous beyond expectation, is ever ready to give solace and consolation to the afflicted mind and it is no wonder he draws multitudes from all over India to him. This figure is placed diametrically opposite to the figures of Sri Rama and Sita.

Chitra Sabha

We trace our steps from the Divine Maruthi to the northern extremity of the eastern corridor. The images of Kankalanathar (Lord Siva at Darukavana forest giving dharsan to the wives of the sages there) and Venugopal (enticing the Gopis with the melody of his flute) and two monolithic elephants on either side of the

steps, invite us to the Chitra Sabha. On the outer walls of the Sabha, the images of Sakthi Ganapathy and Balasubramanya are specially niched. Inside the Sabha, the idols of Siva and Sakthi in Urthva thandava pose, of the sages Pathanjali and Vyagra-bhadar, of Arjuna, Bhima and Hanuman are seen. But to our great amazement in the Garbhagraha we see a mirror reflecting only our own image revealing the eternal truth that god is within us and that to attain self-realisation we ought to worship Siva, Vishnu, Ganapathy and others.

In the eastern corridor we find a huge white bull called Makkalai facing Lord Sthanumalaya. It is a gigantic bull 12½ ft. high in its lying posture. Next to Makkalai is the celebrated shrine of Konnayadi. We get the dharsan of Konnayadinathar in the hollow at the foot of the tree, where three lingas sprout one above the other. This can be seen only at the time of abhisheka, for they are usually hidden in a golden kavacha. The branches of the konnai (laurel) tree are also seen at the top of the shrine.

Garuda Mandapam

Next to the Konnayadi is the Garuda Mandapam. The pillars here contain some of the best sculptures. The image of Garudalvar, facing Lord Vishnu, is superb.

The statue of Thirumalai Nayakkar is spectacular. The ingenuity of the sculptor is incredible, for the very veins seem to pulsate with life. Another wonder is that a piece of wire when introduced through the right nostril of the statue comes out of the left ear, and when it is made to pass through the right ear comes out of the left.

Chempakaraman Mandapam

Then we come to the Dhwaya Mandapam where two flagstaffs are erected, one in front of Sthanumalaya and the other in front of Vishnu. Passing the Dwarapalakas we reach the Chempakaraman Mandapam, a museum of art and architecture. It is a beautiful pavilion with thirty two massive pillars in four rows. Each pillar has a story to tell with interesting episodes from the Siva and Vishnu puranas.

Sanctum Sanctorum

From the Mandapam we enter the Sanctum Sanctorum of Lord Sthanumalaya, fully illuminated by oil lamps. Crossing the Nandi, we have the dharsan of Lord Sthanumalaya in the form of a Linga 1½ ft. high. Except at the time of abhisheka the linga is fully covered by a golden kavacha. The charming serenity of the spot and the devotion and piety of the archakas are so

impressive that at the time of deeparathana, all human glory and vanity seem insignificant in the presence of the Lord.

On the northern side is the shrine of Lord Nataraja posed in eternal dance, always reminding the devotee of the Lord at Chidambaram. There are three more smaller shrines dedicated to Moodu Ganapathy, Durga and Sankaranarayana on the southern side of the prakara.

Adjacent to Sthanumalaya, on the southern side known as Thekkedam, the shrine of Vishnu is situated. The image of Vishnu is more than 7 ft. high and is covered with a silver kavacham. In front there are small bronze images of Vishnu with Sridevi and Bhudevi. The solemnity of the whole place reminds the devotee of Lord Venkitachalapathy. Behind this shrine in the prakara are smaller ones of Amarabhujangaperumal and Suchindaperumal with Umayal. Coming around the prakara and having dharsan of Chandeswara, we re-enter the Nataraja Sannathi.

We trace our steps through Chempakaraman Mandapam to the Gopuravasal, coming round the small shrine of Indira Vinayaka. The panels in the Gopuravasal contain very beautiful carvings of Jwaradeva, Vamana Avatar and many others. It is worthwhile to climb the Gopuram and see

the beautiful paintings of Suchindrum Sthalapurana and episodes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, painted on the inner walls of the Gopuram.

The unique feature of Suchindrum Temple is that both Saivites and Vaishnavites hold the temple in high esteem. The shrines within, which are thirty in number, are conspicuous for their beauty and grace. The sanctum sanctorum presenting a Linga, the Thekkedam presenting the image of Vishnu (human form), the Konnayadi presenting the three svayambulingas at the foot of an old tree (nature worship), the holy sanctum of Chitra Sabha presenting a mirror (formless aspect of self-realisation) and many other smaller shrines presenting almost all the deities of Hindu Pantheon, afford opportunities for all classes of people to worship here. All these remarkably enhance the significance of this Temple which has rightly been called the spiritual capital of Nanjilnad

Antiquity and History of the Temple

It is an irrefutable fact that Konnayadi is very very old. Parts of the tree were sent to London and Calcutta, and were examined by experts who concluded that the tree would have flourished atleast 2000 years ago. There is evidence to show that Thekkedam and Vadakkedam might have

been constructed before 947 A.D. Almost all the shrines in the first prakara came into existence before the first quarter of the 12th century. New structures appeared as years rolled by. The porch was constructed in the 12th century. Udaya Marthanda Mandapam and Subramanya Swami Temple were built in 1213 A.D. Between the years 1471 and 1819 further constructions were added by Pandya, Chera and Chola kings. The splendid shrine of Garudalvar, facing Thekkedam, was another handiwork of Thirumalai Nayakkar. Fresh shrines, more images and huge structures were introduced from time to time, by different dynasties.

LEGENDS AND FOLKLORE

Atri and Anasuya

The great sage Atri and his devoted wife Anasuya had their hermitage at Gnanaranya (now known as Suchindrum). Anasuya was renowned for her chastity. Once the sage Atri was away to participate in a Yagna, and in his absence Anasuya was doing pooja to the Padhatheertha of her Lord. She was able to bring rains from the skies by sprinkling the padatheertha of her husband during the times of severe drought. When Lakshmi, Saraswathi and Parvathi heard through Narada that a woman of the world had excelled them in her love towards her husband, they became jealous and decided to test the chastity of Anasuya.

To satisfy the bidding of their wives, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva appeared at the hermitage of Anasuya, in the form of old brahmins and begged alms. When she was about to serve them food, they told her that they had taken a vow not to eat food served by a person who wore any dress. She prayed to her Lord and sprinkled the padatheertha on the brahmins. Immediately the old brahmins were transformed into three suckling babies.

The long absence of the Gods instilled fear in the minds of the three Devies, and they approached Anasuya for mangalya biksha. Anasuya sprinkled the padatheertha on the babies and the three Gods appeared in their resplendent glory by the side of their partners. The devas, rishis and sages came to Gnanaranya to have the holy dharsan of the Tirumurthis. When they disappeared, there sprouted three Svayambulingas at the foot of a laurel tree. This laurel tree and the lingas can be seen even now at the Suchindrum temple.

Indra and Ahalya

Once Indra was infatuated with Ahalya, wife of rishi Gautama. One night he took the form of a cock, came to the hermitage of Gautama and gave the clarion call. Thinking that he was late for his bath. Gautama arose and hurried to the river. Indra in the disguise of Gautama, entered

the hermitage and molested Ahalya. Gautama saw the river yet sleeping returned to the hermitage to find Ahalya and Indra there. He cursed Indra that his body should be covered with a thousand female genital organs, and Ahalya to become a stone. Greatly afflicted by his disgrace, Indra went to Gnanaranya and did penance for a long time. At last the grace of Lord Siva purified him thoroughly. Indra built the shrine and the Tirumurthis were represented in one Linga with the name Sthanumalaya. The legend is that Indra is still doing the Ardhajama Pooja in the temple every night, and as Indra was purified at Gnanaranya, its name is changed to Suchindrum.

The Virgin Goddess of Kanyakumari

Once when dharma declined and adharma reared its ugly head, Parasakthi promised that she would restore order and righteousness in the world, by annihilating the evil forces headed by Banasura, the King of Demons.

She came to Kanyakumari in the form of a virgin girl and began to do penance. Arrangements were made for her wedding with Sthanumalaya of Suchindrum and an auspicious hour was fixed at midnight on a particular date for the marriage. Narada wanted to stop the marriage because the death of Banasura could be achieved only



by a virgin. Sthanumalaya started for Kanyakumari, eager not to miss the auspicious hour. When he reached Vazhukkumparai, about 3 miles from Suchindrum, Narada assumed the form of a cock and crowed loudly, and thus heralded the break of dawn. Thinking that the auspicious hour had passed, Lord Sthanumalaya returned to Suchindrum, and the Goddess decided to remain a virgin everafter.

Festivals

There are two important festivals, one in the month of Markazhi and the other in the month of Chithirai. During the Markazhi festival ending with the Arudhra Dharsan, the Lord Suchindaperumal and other deities are taken out in procession around the streets. On the ninth day the Car Festival is conducted with great pomp and show when three cars are drawn around the streets.

The Chithirai festival is conducted in a similar manner excepting for the last two days when only 2 cars are taken out on the ninth day, and on the tenth day Lord Suchindaperumal and Umayal are taken round the Mandapam of the tank on a decorative float.

Thus this sacred shrine of the south leaves indelible impressions in the minds of the visitors and no tourist fails to carry sweet memories on his exit from the shrine.



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